

An Essential Film-Viewing Guide for Today's Young Gay Male

“How could he even *claim* to be gay if he's never seen *Serial Mom*?!”

My good friend Erik was aghast! His new co-worker, a lad in his early 20s, had confessed that he'd never heard of the John Waters camp classic starring Kathleen Turner.

At first, I shared his shock. But then, after giving it some thought, I tried to talk Erik down from his rage.

“Cut the kid some slack,” I advised. “After all, there's way more content to keep track of now than when we were his age!”¹

It's true! Erik and I grew up in the days of three TV networks, Top 40 radio, and movie theatres running ads in newspapers. At that time, there was only about 50 years' worth of films and film history, and 25 years of TV, to absorb and retain.

It was before cable, and streaming, offered us hundreds of channels and literally tens of thousands of film and TV titles from which to choose at any moment. It was before narrowcasting replaced broadcasting. It was before DIY stardom, web series, social media, and influencers blurred all the lines.

Back in those dark ages, despite the lack of endless sources of constant show-biz chatter that we have now, it was ironically so much *easier* to stay on top of pop culture – especially gay pop culture.

That's because any film with gay content, or with a gay sensibility, was so incredibly rare, we jumped on it, then immediately told all our queer friends!

¹ Need evidence? Over 170 – that's one-hundred-seventy – drama series alone were eligible for Emmy consideration in 2022.

So as a service to my younger gay male readers, here's a by-no-means-complete list of 20 seminal movies made before 2000² (in order of release date) that you absolutely must see before discussing your love of films with your gay elders – thereby reducing the risk of invoking their gay ire.

1. *Rope* (1948)

Alfred Hitchcock's "one take" thriller about two men committing the perfect murder of a classmate (inspired by infamous gay murderers Leopold and Loeb) is as close to a gay film as one could hope to make (or see) in the 1940s.

In fact, in Patrick Hamilton's play on which this film is based, the men are explicitly homosexual. But thanks to the strict rules of Hollywood's Hayes Code, all overt signs of homosexuality were excised, leaving only subtext.

But, man, what subtext!

After hiding the body, then preparing for a dinner party, Brandon and Philip (played by John Dall and Farley Granger) breathlessly discuss their murderous act almost as if they're recalling an intense session of lovemaking. With their faces just inches apart, they lovingly recall each step of their crime ("How did you feel...?"), talking in increasingly hushed, heated, excited voices ("... And then?"), until the conversation comes to a quivering climax ("Exhilarated! ... How did you feel?"). It makes murder feel downright orgasmic!

In fact, there are so many shots of the two men standing close enough to kiss, you'd have to be Helen Keller to *not* see the homoeroticism.

As Brandon and Philip entertain their guests – with their dead classmate's body stashed in the chest on which they've served dinner – it feels as if more than one secret is hiding in plain sight.

² This is by no means a definitive list. But it's mine. Your top 20 might be totally different and still be 100% correct.

God knows, Hitchcock was certainly no stranger to kink. One wonders, how much of the “joke” was Hitch in on? And how much was driven by Dall and Granger – both of whom, we’ve since learned, were gay themselves?

2. *All About Eve* (1950)

There are no out gay characters in this cautionary tale of life in the theatre (though venomous critic Addison DeWitt, played by George Sanders, is without a doubt a closeted queen), and there are no overt gay references. So why is this classic film beloved by gay men of all ages?

That’s easy. Bette Davis’ stage star Margo Channing is a female drag queen, swooping around in fabulous frocks, smoking furiously, throwing shade, getting drunk, pouting, and tossing fur coats like they were ponchos.

There are also glamorous people in gorgeous clothes, all living in fabulous apartments, dropping vicious, quotable one-liners. Oh, and if that wasn’t already more than enough, there’s also an early career appearance by Marilyn Monroe!

It all adds up to one fabulous movie. As backstabbing Eve Harrington, Anne Baxter is perhaps the film’s one weak link – but somehow, her breathy, one-note performance only makes her Eve seem even *less* human, *less* sincere, and that much *more* monstrous!

As we watch, many of us fancy ourselves to be Margo Channing. Alas, in reality, most of us are probably more Birdie Coogan, the smart-assed personal assistant played by the always hilarious Thelma Ritter.

3. *Victim* (1961)

This story of a married lawyer who’s blackmailed for being gay was incredibly frank for its time. Even more amazing? It starred a bona fide British film star and matinee idol, handsome Dirk Bogarde. You have to hand it to those Brits!

We like attorney Melville because he is not stereotypical, nor pathetic, nor suicidal. Straight audiences can accept him because he doesn’t actually have sex

with another man in the film. “I stopped seeing him because I WANTED HIM! Do you understand? I WANTED HIM!!” he finally exclaims to his wife after she asks, “Were you the other man?”

Sadly, there are limits, even in this film. When his wife asks if Melville loved the guy, he replies that “those feelings” can’t be love. Now, that may be true for this character at that point in his life, but it’s not a great message to send to gay audiences desperately starved for representation. But we took whatever we could get in those days.

4. *Valley of the Dolls* (1967)

A wildly unrealistic tale of three women who join show business, get addicted to drugs and booze, and meet their respective ruins. Total camp and a complete train wreck, this film adaptation of Jacqueline Susann’s lurid bestseller is one of the first mainstream films to casually mention homosexuality without being *about* homosexuality – perhaps that’s why gay men love it so. Or maybe it’s because Patty Duke is supposed to be gay icon Judy Garland or because Sharon Tate is supposed to be gay icon Marilyn Monroe. Or maybe because the film is supposed to be a drama (seriously!) but is filled with unintentionally hilarious dialogue,³ one-note performances, and the absurd notion that being married to Neely O’Hara makes for very effective gay-conversion therapy. Bonus points for Ms. Tate’s delivery of “You know how bitchy fags can be!” – her line reading almost makes it sound like a compliment!

5. *The Boys in the Band* (1970)

Take a Valium (or two), light a joint, and throw back a Scotch (or three), before you settle in for the brutal original film adaptation of Mart Crowley’s stage hit about nine gay friends (who don’t actually like each other very much) gathering for a

³ “Tony? Tony! Tony?! *Tony!*!” “Boobies! Boobies! *Boobies!*” “GOD?!”

birthday party. Perhaps the first American film to attempt an unflinching look at gay life, it's not fun, nor particularly funny – but remains a gritty, revealing window into that period of time when many gays were stuck somewhere between self-loathing and self-acceptance. You'll never appreciate more how far we've come than after seeing this time capsule

6. *Death In Venice* (1971)

If you still have a Valium left after watching *The Boys in the Band*, or if you haven't finished off that bottle of Scotch ...

On its surface, this film does feel a little bit cringe-worthy by today's standards. But it's about so much more.

Our friend Dirk Bogarde is back, this time in a film version of Thomas Mann's classic 1912 novel, directed by Luchino Visconti.

Bogarde plays sickly composer Gustav von Aschenbach, who travels to a grand resort in Venice to rest and recover from heart disease, exhaustion and ennui.

Then Gustav spies Tadzio (Bjorn Andresen), the angelic adolescent son of fellow spa guests. Gustav becomes intrigued and reenergized by, and then completely obsessed with, the beautiful young blond. The composer begins to subtly stalk his new young muse throughout Venice.

So enamored of his new obsession, Gustav doesn't notice that the city is gripped by a cholera epidemic and is being constantly hosed down with disinfectant wash. Death is all around, but Gustav visits a barber, where he dyes his gray hair black to appear younger, and continues stalking, coming closer and closer and closer ...

You're thinking "Ewwwww!" right about now, correct? But Gustav's not a pedophile. His pinning for the young lad isn't based on lust – or, at least, not *merely* on lust. Rather, it's the ideal of longing, lost innocence, lost youth and beauty, lost good health. Indeed, Tadzio represents life itself, whereas Gustav and Venice are both dying and rotting with decay.

Like young Tadzio, the film itself is painfully beautiful.

7. *Female Trouble* (1974)

Most people say *Pink Flamingos* is the “must-see” flick from Water’s earlier career. But since I’m not a fan of swallowing my own vomit or watching singing assholes in extreme close up, I much prefer this follow-up!

This one also stars Waters’ favorite “leading lady,” 300-pound “male actress” Divine, as Dawn Davenport, a “hair-hopping” juvenile delinquent who runs away from home after her parents fail to give her a pair of “cha-cha heels” for Christmas. She’s immediately raped by a bum (also played by Divine, out of drag), then gives birth to an ungrateful brat played by Mink Stole.

Dawn is taken in by a pair of felonious beauticians who encourage her to dedicate herself to a life of bizarre, violent crimes – culminating in a nightclub act wherein Dawn bounces on a trampoline (!) while shooting members of the audience dead.

She is arrested and quickly convicted. And once Dawn is finally strapped into the electric chair, she couldn’t be happier – she sees this as the equivalent of an Academy Award for a life of crime!

There are lots of hilarious, quotable lines in this one, including my personal favorite, when Mink Stole informs her mom’s boyfriend, “I wouldn’t suck your cock if I were suffocating and there was oxygen in your balls!”

8. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

This film adaptation of the British rock-and-roll stage musical, itself a spoof of 1950s horror films, was a rite of passage for many queer folk my age. While it may seem tame by today’s sensibilities, it felt truly revolutionary back in the day.

Square school sweethearts Brad and Janet are driving one late, rainy night when their car has a blow-out. They seek help from the “castle down the road.” They soon find themselves at a convention of motorcycle-riding space aliens, who have gathered to watch mad transvestite Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry in a star-making turn) create a muscular sexual plaything in a gold Speedo named Rocky.

There's more bed-hopping than a season of *Dynasty*: after sleeping with his blond creation, Frank-N-Furter then seduces Janet, and then Brad. Janet then beds Rocky, and ... you get the idea! It's all set to a rollicking rock-and-roll score and ends with a big production number complete with – a swimming pool? – and the inspiring message “Don't dream it. Be it.”

Home viewings of this one do not count. You've not really experienced *RHPS* until you've caught a midnight screening with cosplayers acting out in front of the screen and an audience screaming, throwing toast, tossing toilet paper, and all the rest of it. Good luck finding one – the NuArt in West Los Angeles still screens it at midnight on Saturdays, but there aren't many others left!

9. *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975)

I take it as a personal affront whenever a young gay man asks me, “Who's Quentin Crisp?” Not just because I've played the iconic British gay legend (twice), but because he's truly one of our first champions and philosophers – daring to be openly and outrageously gay in a time and place where doing so got you beat up (repeatedly) and/or arrested.

In fact, Mr. Crisp was perhaps our first gender-fluid public personality – if that term had existed back in the early 1900s – daring to wear nail polish, frilly frocks, and “make-up at a time when even on women eye shadow was sinful!”

Faithfully based on Crisp's memoir, this British TV movie stars John Hurt as young Crisp, who's shunned by more “manly” gay men for being a sissy. But Crisp refuses to conform and conducts his life exactly as he wants – he lives alone and likes it, cultivating an eclectic group of friends and admirers, while struggling to find work without compromising his identity.

The highlight of the film comes when Crisp is wrongly arrested for soliciting for sex. He defends himself in court, declares himself as openly homosexual “for the world to see” on the witness stand – and is found innocent!

The film – packed with Crisp’s philosophical quotes and witticisms – eventually played on PBS in America, turning Crisp into an international celebrity and a gay icon. (And rightly so, I might add!)

10. *The Ritz* (1976)

For the first time on screen, chubby chasing was not only referenced, but was a main plot point of a story! An overweight mafioso, running from hit men intent on killing him, hides out in a gay bathhouse – and then has to hide from a gay chubby chaser determined to bed him! Based on the hit Broadway farce, this film seems a bit ahead of its time, with its “no big deal” approach to the bathhouse milieu. In fact, back when I was in high school, I remember seeing this on the “CBS Late Movie,” without so much as a viewer’s advisory disclaimer. Perhaps it’s because the cast – particularly Rita Moreno as bathhouse entertainer Googie Gomez and Treat Williams as a macho but high-pitched detective – is so fucking funny that you cannot possibly be offended.

11. *Taxi Zum Klo* (1980)

There was no way this film would ever play in Indiana theatres when I was in high school, but I read about it in *American Film* magazine. In fact, just reading about this film scared me more than a bit. It’s all about a school teacher in a committed relationship with another man who still seeks anonymous (explicit!) sex with strangers. Some viewers argued then that he was a sex addict; others claimed it was an honest, unflinching look at gay life. I wasn’t ready to watch this one until years after I’d moved to San Francisco, after I’d evolved into a more tolerant, modern-day homo. This is one of those films you *need* to watch, even though you might not necessarily enjoy watching it. If nothing else, it’s a very good litmus test of where you are and what you want from your relationship(s).

12. *Cruising* (1980)

This movie, also a bit scary in its time, is now quite laughable in retrospect – once you get past some pretty disturbing violence, that is.

Forty years after its release, this movie is rightly remembered more for the uproar it created than for the actual film itself. The nascent “gay liberation” movement was rightly concerned the movie would label gay men in general, or leather queens specifically, as homicidal maniacs. They feared it would lead to increased violence against the LGBTQ community. They protested long and loud but were ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the film’s production and release.

And that’s too bad. Not because the film is offensive, but because it just plain sucks.

It’s merely a flaccid cop thriller, all about a uniform beat cop recruited to go undercover and “play gay” to catch a serial killer preying upon patrons of Manhattan’s leather-bar scene.

Sadly, the film skimps on relatable characters or believable plot points in favor of extended shots of Al Pacino furiously puffing poppers and dancing like an embarrassingly manic madman on the dance floor.

The end of the film *wants* you to wonder: Did the investigation turn Pacino’s cop gay? Or was he gay but closeted all along?

But all you’re likely to ponder is, why should anybody care?

Hardly a glowing recommendation, to be sure. But this film, like *Taxi Zum Klo*, should still be endured, at least once, for historical perspective.

13. *Mommie Dearest* (1981)

What? You haven’t seen this one? Put this book down immediately, go watch this film, then report back.

Done? Congratulations! You are now officially a member of the “rest of us.”

Why is this Joan Crawford biopic/Faye Dunaway kabuki vehicle such a gay classic?

Perhaps for the same reason Erik and I got into a heated argument on the bus home immediately after we saw a matinee.

He insisted then that Dunaway's performance deserved an Oscar nomination, if not the Academy Award itself!

"Ha!" I laughed in his face. Yes, I agreed, "Dunaway was certainly ... committed!" But even if her over-the-top histrionics didn't turn off critics and the Academy, I argued, the film's high-gloss-yet-low-depth shallowness ensured it could never be taken seriously.

We were both right, as it turns out, and that's why I think this film has endured with gay audiences for over forty years. Dunaway is magnificent *and* horrific. The film is hilarious *and* gut-wrenching, beautifully shot but horribly directed. You feel for the characters as you laugh in their faces. A gorgeous, glamorous, fashion-filled shit show stuffed to overflowing with ugliness and hideosity.

Most gay men of my generation grew up living in conflicting "realities" simultaneously and appreciating the absurdity of it all, so maybe that's why *Mommie Dearest* struck such a chord with so many of us!

14. *Making Love* (1982)

Neither an honest nor important gay film, this was Hollywood's version of an "Honest, Important Gay Film." And in 1982, how could that not fail?

There are still a few things to admire about this low-budget story of a closeted, married doctor who finally admits his desire for other men in general, and for Harry Hamlin in particular. But overall, this film is more about how Hollywood saw us and less about who we really were. You can almost hear the film creak under the strain, as it attempts to be frank while also pulling its punches in an effort to be mainstream.

Kate Jackson of *Charlie's Angels* is pretty good as the unsuspecting network-executive wife. (In one scene, when she dismisses a TV script called "Hallinan's Dolls," you can't help but wonder if it's a dig at the series she'd left in disgust.)

Watching this one in an Indiana cinema half-filled with straight folk felt a bit like a radical, death-defying feat. When the two male leads kissed for the first time, then tumbled into bed and made out, I thought the roof of the theatre would blow off. My gay friend and I rushed out before the credits even began to roll.

15. *Victor/Victoria* (1982)

Although it was released the same year as *Making Love*, *Victor/Victoria* is adored as much as the other film is abhorred. Maybe it's because this one didn't force straight audiences to endure a man-on-man kiss. But other than that, it's pretty queer for a mainstream Hollywood release!

Julie Andrews is a down-on-her-luck singer in 1930s Paris who finds fame and riches when her gay friend convinces her to pose as a male drag queen. All is great, until she falls in love with confused straight gangster James Garner.

Alas, this film does cop out at a pivotal moment – letting Garner off the hook by allowing him to uncover Victor's secret *before* he kisses him/her (an error that was corrected in the Broadway re-do 15 years later). But overall, you will laugh heartily. You'll also admire this film for its guts – but don't confuse it with *Tootsie*, which is a fun feminist tale, not a queer one.

16. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)

This one felt revolutionary in its day, for it was one of the first feature films in which lead characters were coincidentally gay. That is, their orientation and romance had absolutely nothing to do with the main story. Once again, British cinema was ready to "go there" when Hollywood wasn't. Daniel Day-Lewis first found fame as street thug Johnny, who abandons his gangster life to open a ritzy laundromat with his Pakistani boyfriend Omar (Gordon Warnecke) in working-class London. As the

film ends, you'll feel as though you've witnessed diverse worlds you don't see in American films, because you have. You'll also feel hopelessly (and hope-fully) romantic.

17. *Parting Glances* (1986)

It's 24 hours in the life of frustrated Manhattan writer Michael (Richard Ganoung), his stuffy live-in lover Robert (John Bolger), and his punk-rocker ex-boyfriend Nick (Steve Buscemi in his screen debut).

It's a bittersweet time for Michael. Robert is flying out in the morning for an extended work assignment in Africa. And Nick, whom Michael has never truly gotten over, is battling AIDS. But there's no time for Michael to feel maudlin. He's too busy proofreading a rich friend's sci-fi gay-porn novel, playing nursemaid to Nick, then enduring an evening of bon-voyage dinners and parties for Robert.

Writer/director Bill Sherwood's first (and, sadly, his only) film is one of the first to tackle AIDS onscreen. It bursts with vibrant, true-to-life performances and circumstances, and captures a particular time and place – mid-1980s New York City and its queer-arts scene – with such micro-surgical precision that it feels like a literal time capsule of that period.

You'll laugh, you'll cry, and when it ends, you'll wish you could spend another 24 hours with Michael and his fascinating group of friends, lovers, exes, and co-workers.

18. *Maurice* (1987)

E.M. Forster's novel of frustrated first love gets the lush Merchant/Ivory treatment in this subtle, slow-moving, and completely swoon-worthy film adaptation.

Maurice and Clive (James Wilby, Hugh Grant) are Cambridge schoolmates who fall helplessly in love. But given that it's 1909, Clive eventually chickens out and marries Anne. There are lots of longing and loving glances between the two, and lots

of bulky-knit sweaters, as Maurice continues to moon away for his caddish crush. That is, until Maurice meets Clive's swarthy gamekeeper Alec (Rupert Graves) – seeing them together suddenly gives Clive second thoughts about his life as a straight man.

Foppish Hugh Grant, or earthy Rupert Graves? Whom would *you* choose?

19. *Serial Mom* (1994)

“Is this the cocksucker residence?”

By far John Waters' best film (and Mr. Waters agrees), this hilarious spoof of true-life crime sagas tells the tale of suburban Baltimore housewife and mother Beverly Sutphin (Kathleen Turner), who flies into a murderous rage whenever someone insults her children (Ricki Lake and Matthew Lillard), steals her parking space (watch out, Mink Stole!), or wears white shoes after Labor Day (rest in peace, Patty Hearst!). Her weapons of choice include an air conditioner, a pay-phone receiver, and even a leg of lamb.

Once arrested, Beverly becomes a media sensation, leading her son's horror film-loving girlfriend to exclaim, “You're bigger than Freddie and Jason, only better. You're a real person!”

Although it pre-dates O.J. Simpson's murder trial, Waters later correctly pointed out that his film eerily predicted how *that* case would play out: a defendant doesn't have to be innocent to win, he or she simply has to discredit and humiliate every witness for the prosecution!

And don't worry. As a disclaimer explains, “no one involved in the crimes received any kind of financial compensation” for the film version of this “true story.”

20. *First Wives Club* (1996)

A gay film? Not really. Like *All About Eve*, it's more about the film's bitchy gay sensibilities and quotable dialogue. Plus, this over-the-top comedy stars three of gaydom's favorite divas (Bette Midler, Goldie Hawn, and Diane Keaton) – or four,

if you include an over-too-soon cameo by Stockard Channing that sets the plot in motion. Or five, if you count Maggie Smith as a hilarious matron of New York society. Or even six, because there's also a pre-*Sex and the City* Sarah Jessica Parker as a greedy gold-digging tramp. It's all about a trio of middle-aged women who seek revenge after being dumped for younger dames by their no-good ex-husbands. Hawn's youth-obsessed, alcohol-addled star "Eloise Elliot," in particular, is a character to whom many gay men "of a certain age" can certainly relate!

And here's one extra title:

The Celluloid Closet (1995)

Watch this documentary to learn more about these and many more gay films (and to see the *real* Quentin Crisp), then read Vito Russo's exhaustive, page-turning textbook on which it's based to learn even more about queer-cinema history.

Other than *Celluloid Closet*, I wouldn't even attempt a list of important gay documentaries – of which there are many – because, for one thing, I'm not in that business!

But I've given you plenty of titles to start with. Since DVDs are a thing of the past, and since I'm old, it's up to *you* to hunt these gems down.

And once you've watched these titles, move onto these honorable mentions from the previous century (in no particular order): *Cabaret*, *Longtime Companion*, *Jeffrey*, *Death Becomes Her*, *Trick*, *Another Country*, *Different from the Others*, *Broken Hearts Club*, *The Sum of Us*, *Wilde*, *Beautiful Thing*, *Gods & Monsters*, *Capote*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Suddenly Last Summer* ...

You're welcome.